

## Japan Shows Off Its Diplomatic Muscle

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With a rapidly changing regional context and increasing tension from neighbouring states, Japan's foreign affairs plate is very full. In the last seven months, North Korean nuclear tests, incursions into territorial water by [Chinese vessels](#), and planned construction of Russian military bases in the disputed [Northern Territories](#), are just a sample of the activities undertaken by regional actors in East Asia. Japan has approached these arguably aggressive activities, and subsequent perceived rise in tension, by showing off its muscle. Not the traditional military kind, but rather an unprecedented display, in Japanese terms, of diplomatic soft power.

While Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's domestic agenda (particularly the passage of contentious security [legislation](#) last fall and his desire to amend the [constitution](#)) challenges Japan's post-war prioritisation of dialogue and mediation, 2016 has nevertheless been a significant year of diplomacy. Japan currently holds the rotating presidency of the G7; it began its record eleventh two-year stint as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council as of 1st January; and currently holds the rotating presidency for the first time since [2010](#). Closer to home, Japan and South Korea resolved their decades-long dispute regarding the Second World War-era abuse of *comfort women* with a landmark [deal](#) signed on 28th December 2015. Finally, later this year, Japan will [chair](#) the seventh Japan-China-South Korea Trilateral Summit, only the second summit between the three leaders since 2012.

Among its regional neighbours, Japan's diplomatic activities have centred on response to events in both North Korea and Russia. Following the North's series of nuclear tests, Japan played a leading role in the Security Council and [worked closely](#) with South Korea and the US to secure the unanimous adoption of a new sanctions resolution. Furthermore, despite Russia's military activities in the Northern Territories, Prime Minister Abe remains active in his pursuit of a peace treaty, which Russia and Japan have

not signed since the end of the Second World War. On 6<sup>th</sup> May Abe met President Putin at an unofficial visit in Sochi where the two leaders [agreed](#) to advance negotiations through 'new approaches' to resolve their island dispute. Peace talks have remained ongoing throughout the summer and further reciprocal visits by the two leaders will occur in the autumn.

Finally, in addition to hosting the G7 Summit in Ise-Shima and additional G7 ministerial meetings, Japan has demonstrated leadership in the forum in recent weeks. In light of the recent British decision to leave the European Union, Prime Minister Abe urged his Finance Minister Taro Aso to closely consult with his G7 counterparts in responding to market changes and monetary [policy](#); a joint [statement](#) was subsequently issued on 24<sup>th</sup> June. Moreover, Japan is currently arranging a joint statement with the G7 members in response to the recent Permanent Court of Arbitration decision siding against China's claim for maritime rights in the South China Sea. This will be the third statement issued by the G7 focused on maritime security since April. In the Ise-Shima Leaders' [Declaration](#), leaders reiterated their 'commitment to maintaining a rules-based maritime order in accordance with the principles of international law as reflected in UNCLOS.' Thanks to Japan's efforts, and in the context of ongoing disputes in the South China Sea, maritime security has received considerable attention among the world's most advanced democracies.

Even as domestic events potentially presage a strategic shift; diplomacy, dialogue, and negotiation have remained a primary focus of the Japanese central government and the Foreign Ministry over the course of this year. This highlights the fact that despite facing an increasingly complex and challenging regional context, Japan continues to view diplomacy as a valuable foreign policy tool. With a consolidated majority in the Diet, Abe's government is increasingly able to project stability and maturity abroad while taking advantage of leadership positions in multilateral fora to demonstrate that it too can play with fire when required. Fortunately, it believes in fire of the diplomatic kind, rather than that of island-building and showboating.